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## Plans (in Brief)

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## **PLANS (IN BRIEF)**

UPON GOING OUTSIDE FOR MORNING paper, discover that car, 1985 Buick Skylark, has been egged repeatedly and without compunction. Look long and hard at Skylark, newspaper in hand, tattered bathrobe flapping about knees, sun rising slowly over distant mountains. Upon thorough examination of crime scene, decide that said egging can in no way be accidental, perhaps the result of solar winds, say, or the unprecedented gravitational effect of the Earth's alignment with Pluto. No, immediately decide that said egging is obvious work of no-goodniks bent upon the intimidation of effeminate – and possibly gay – stepson Stephen, son of wife Patricia, result of her previous marriage to door-to-door insurance salesman, fruit of her passion with another man, a man not yourself. Remember with twinge of self-reproach that Patricia once remarked fondly upon previous husband's ability to stimulate her to orgasm while she was yet fully clothed. Acknowledge that said twinge of self-reproach arises from own inability to satisfy Patricia orally, manually, financially, or emotionally. Concede that own tongue is good for nothing more than tasting food.

Go back inside two-story colonial home to get much-needed second cup of coffee. As security of home and family have now been violated, look upon house in new light. It has seventy-four years, squeaky ceiling fans, stained glass windows, mouse-infested basement, stucco exterior, carport, a front porch where you and Patricia sit during summer nights and the house is too hot for sleep; there is no air-conditioning. The house, along with her son Stephen, was awarded to Patricia in the divorce. It is the same house wherein Patricia and previous husband spent duration of their ten-year marriage. You and Patricia sleep in the same room, upon the same mattress, where their only son was conceived, where his body breached her body, where his sperm infected her egg. Upon this bed, Patricia was brought to orgasm while yet fully clothed.

There is no denying that you love her son. He is caring

and affectionate. He kisses you on the forehead each night before bed, turns on the coffee maker before he leaves for school in the morning, makes tortured-animal sounds on the electric guitar you bought him for his previous birthday, his sixteenth.

Pour third cup of coffee, drink black. Resign self to the love felt for another man's offspring, another man's young. Remember that just two nights ago a car of boys drove by and screamed homophobic epithets while you sat on front porch with Patricia and a pitcher of iced tea. "Burn you fucking faggot." While stepson is noticeably effeminate – he plays no sports, has never shown interest in girls, fills marble composition books with poems, pressed flowers, reads his mother's magazines, *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*, and, as Patricia has told you, played with dolls when he was younger, a child, scorned the toy violence of soldiers and robots and guns – it wasn't until then, until hearing those words come out of strangers, that you found yourself wondering. The incident repeated itself the following night. The gas pedal punched, the tires squealed, and then they were gone. You went inside the house to find him, Stephen, your stepson, crying on his bed. Your heart instantly breaks when you see him. You almost start to cry yourself. You ask him who they were. He tells you. You know these boys. They are in Stephen's grade, his classmates. They used to be friends with him. They came over to watch baseball on the television, play videogames, football in the backyard. You leave Stephen alone with his crying because you are not his father and you never will be.

Pour fourth cup of coffee. Add too much sugar, too little expired half and half. Drink with irrepressible grimace of disgust. You have never made yourself a satisfying cup of coffee. While drinking, consider your life. Consider first the nature of children, that we are all slated to watch our parents fill with sickness and die. Consider parents, that we do not beget for the sake of life, but so that they may watch us, their mothers, their fathers, wither and pass. So that we may not be forgotten.

Consider next your marriage. At forty-four you wed Patricia in a purely legal ceremony. She explained that her soul was already pledged to another man and nothing as simple as divorce could give it back to her. She quoted Matthew 19: "...and



the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” But if she had it back, if somehow her soul were once again her own, she would keep it. And you, you did not marry a woman but a life. On that day by the lake, a light breeze, a clouded sun, Stephen in his new suit and bare feet, the ring bearer, just a boy then, Patricia in her wedding dress from years before, and you, you in your khakis, sweating through your dress shirt, wanting only to go home with the family that is suddenly your own, to go home to the two-story colonial that a handful of words have made yours. Because you have never had a family, a home, a place where your absence is noticed.

Pour fifth cup of coffee. Add too much sugar, none of the expired half and half.

You have nowhere to be. The layoffs went in order of reverse-seniority. First the temps, then everyone under a year, then two years, then you. This is the first morning you have stood at the kitchen counter and drank coffee, the first you have not gotten ready for work, the first you have felt vaguely out of place in your own home, your own body. You have not yet told Patricia.

Consider Stephen, your stepson.

Consider what happened the last two nights, what will happen tonight.

Begin to formulate plan. Gears begin to turn, the rat runs around its wheel, the POWs dig three tunnels and name them Tom, Dick, and Harry.

Steve McQueen whips up a batch of devastating moonshine.

And on all their lips the only word is escape, escape.

For a moment you consider that it wasn't enough for people to scream things from moving cars. It wasn't until they egged your Skylark that you decided to act. Redirect self-hatred toward completion of task at hand.

Escape.

#### Plan A

Go to party supply store in Shelbourne Square Shopping Center and buy discount-priced Mylar helium balloons reading “Happy

Hanukah, Josef” and/or “Happy New Year 1986.” Spend approximately six days locked in basement of house with only a gallon jug of water for sustenance. Write detailed letters to everyone you have ever hurt, offended, insulted, publicly humiliated. In midst of fast, look up from pen and paper to see vision of dead parents, sister who lives in Minnesota and hasn’t written in three years, pet dog named Sam that was run over while you, eight, watched. And while the circumstances have always remained fuzzy, you do remember that one instant when Sam, a chocolate lab puppy, ran into the street, froze in front of the oncoming pickup truck, looked to the curb where you sat, an ice cream cone melting down your hand, dripping from your elbow, was crushed under the front tires, then the rear tires, then was dead. And although you don’t rightly know it, that was the instant which begat your fear of pickup trucks, empty roads on cloudless afternoons, responsibility for anything helpless when you yourself are helpless, death. Attach said letters to aforementioned Mylar helium balloons and release en masse into the tranquility of the night sky thereby literally and symbolically lifting the burden of guilt from off soul and shoulders. The balloons lift, glimmer faintly, go higher, disappear. And at that moment, the stars, you think, look as a handful of shattered glass floating in the cloudless sky.

#### Plan B

Bring a peace offering of beer to Fat Ass Prick’s house one day when his parents are away for the weekend. Drink two beers with Fat Ass Prick and then suggest he invite his friend John, the star quarterback of the junior varsity football team, both being, according to Stephen, active participants in the drive-by shouting. Get both thoroughly drunk while watching Sixers’ game. Make witty remarks regarding Dikembe Mutombo’s height, Allen Iverson’s free-throw percentage. Appear calm and relaxed and thereby gain their trust. Allude to own suspicions regarding stepson Stephen’s sexual orientation. Do not, however, watch for evasive eye movements indicative of suppressed laughter. Await neither confirmation nor negation of guilt. Go to refrigerator to get fresh beers. Open beers. Slip roofies into each. Wait patiently



while Fat Ass Prick and Quarterback drink spiked beers and then casually suggest they might be more comfortable upstairs. Once in Fat Ass Prick's bedroom, suggest Fat Ass Prick and Quarterback engage in oral sex. Videotape Fat Ass Prick and Quarterback engaging in drunken, roofied oral sex. Next day, make two copies of videotape and mail one to Fat Ass Prick, one to Junior Varsity Quarterback. Call Fat Ass Prick three days later, during which time he has watched aforementioned videocassette several times, a hundred times, a thousand times, his face covered with tears of shame and panic. Say, "Hello, Prick..." and then listen to the two hundred forty pound prick cry and beg like little girl. "Now listen here, see? Cause I'm only gonna say this once, see?" Feel strangely empowered by the faint ring of James Cagney in voice and then continue. "Now I got two hundred and ten copies of that videotape, see? One for each kid in your class, see? And unless you do exactly what I say I'm gonna mail 'em all out, see? You dirty rat..." Instruct Fat Ass Prick to rob local convenience store at gunpoint, keeping face in plain sight of security camera at all times. Instruct that the money be left in brown paper bag in dry riverbed of woods behind Reading Public Museum. Hang up on Fat Ass Prick and immediately call Quarterback. Wait patiently while Quarterback likewise cries little girl tears of unspeakable shame. "Now listen here, you dirty rat, see? Shut off the waterworks or I'll come over there and slap you something silly." Instruct Quarterback to steal new car from his father's Chrysler dealership, placing in truck life savings from his - Quarterback's - bank account. Threaten to mail videocassettes of roofied oral sex to all members of Township High School junior class if instructions are not followed immediately. Fake death (see Plan D). Leave house at nine p.m. with two hundred and ten copies of videocassette individually wrapped in plain brown paper and addressed to members of Township High School junior class. Drive to woods surrounding Reading Public Museum and abandon Skylark out of sight of passerby. Retrieve brown paper bag of money from dry riverbed and walk to brand new tan Chrysler LeBaron parked nearby on street. Drive toward Mexico with five hundred dollars from convenience store, ten thousand dollars from Quarterback's bank account. Stop in

sleepy Texas town to sell car for additional fifteen thousand dollars. Mail videocassettes from Brownsville, Texas, southernmost point in the continental United States. Enter Mexico on foot. Live out rest of days on white sands of small Mexican fishing village, drinking Corona and enjoying sweet taste of revenge.

#### Plan C

Stay up all night, heart twisted and withered by anger buried deep in the unreachable recesses of soul. At sunrise, suddenly realize the beauty of all creation and accept Jesus Christ as own personal Savior. Begin attending daily mass at local Catholic Church. Donate ten percent of all income to charity. Read Bible at the rate of one book per day, excluding extended genealogical passages. Decide that the best revenge is a life well lived. Work three jobs, sleep only on weekends. Save all money by giving up alcohol, tobacco, and pornography. Apply to Harvard Law and get immediately accepted. Fake death (see Plan D). Study twelve hours a day. Work at local bar to pay expenses à la Tom Cruise in his perennial masterpiece, *Cocktail*. Make Straight A's. Sleep only on weekends. Fall madly in love with girl from Contract Law whose name is either Anne, Angela, or Angelina, likewise a devout Catholic. Spend all free time and meals with Anne, Angela, or Angelina, praising her beauty and pledging undying love and devotion. During course of religious studies, discover to the shock of all concerned that premarital sex is not expressly forbidden by Bible. Convince Anne, Angela, or Angelina of inherent fallibility of Church doctrine and thereby persuade her to have premarital sex. Graduate from Harvard at top of class. Establish successful private practice specializing in pro bono lawsuits on behalf of impoverished individuals; e.g. Welfare Mother v. Large, Faceless Corporation. Marry Anne, Angela, or Angelina. Exchange rings, souls. Retire to small Mexican fishing village. Watch fruit of loins subdue the earth.

#### Plan D

Insure life for exorbitant amount and name wife Patricia as sole beneficiary. Inform friends, Patricia, and stepson Stephen of intentions to go fishing for the day with Markie, former coworker,



now similarly unemployed. Swear Markie to silence in the matter of your fabricated death. Take Markie's boat out into the middle of Blue Marsh Lake on clear, sunny day. Paddle away from other fishermen, recreational boaters, until a safe distance is achieved. Put on scuba gear hidden under tarps in the bow of boat. Say goodbye to Markie for the remainder of natural life or, more likely, "It's a good day to die." Slip off boat and swim down to the murky depths of lake. Upon reaching the bottom, the ultimate depth, the trunks and roots of blasted trees that once stood there, grew there before the planning, the damming, the man-made coming of the lake, look upward and see, glinting through millions of gallons of water, the sun hanging on its twelve o'clock hook, burning none the less bright now that the world thinks you dead and gone forever. Make for distant shore. Bury scuba gear in surrounding woods. Put hand to face, block harsh sun from eyes, and observe, in the shining distance of the lake, Markie screaming at the top of his lungs as nearby boats take notice and approach. "He drowned. He drowned. Jesus. Help."

#### Plan E

Make fresh pot of coffee. Clean shattered eggs from Skylark. Search for new job, a horrible one, the only kind you are qualified for. Try to remember why you married Patricia, if it was just the loneliness or something more, something else entirely. At six o'clock, upon her arrival home from the dentist's office where she works as a receptionist, tell her you were fired. Watch her sigh loudly, drop heavily into a kitchen chair, push the sweaty strands of hair out of her eyes, silently blame you for not wanting the soul she cannot give. And recognize in that instant the end of something that may have never begun, something that may have never involved you at all.